

## Episode 26: Feast of Fools, Part Two

[CHIME OF A PHONE RECORDER BEING TURNED ON.]

[RAINFALL.]

[NYX SIGHS]

**NYX**

Note to Future Nyx.

[RAINFALL CONTINUES.]

Do you ever feel the world slipping through your hands? Not like sand, it's not steady enough for that. It's like- it's like you've been pirouetting nonstop for days, for years. Head snapping back to that focus point. Your momentum carrying you round and round, pivot, pivot, pivot. And then all of a sudden you realise you lost sight of your spot. Your body's moving faster than your head. Any moment you might twist it right off at the neck. And the world is just- a blur. Of colour and sound and it's so loud but it's like you're listening to it through water.

Does that make sense?

[BEAT.]

I started reading these monologues for fun. They're just- a little spooky, y'know? Something silly and spooky to practice my acting with, to spend time... with Bella.

But someone doesn't want me to read them.

[THUNDER RUMBLES.]

Like, *really* doesn't want me to read them. And I can't help wondering... where did they come from? *Who* wrote them? What do they mean?

How far are they willing to go?

How far am I?

[THUNDER RUMBLING.]

[CHIME OF A PHONE RECORDER BEING TURNED OFF.]

**MORGAN**

The Attic Monologues is an urban fantasy horror podcast releasing the last Wednesday of every month. Find us on the podcatcher of your choice, or wander into someplace abandoned and listen for a voice on the wind.

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

**Abigail, as the intro:** Back Again, Back Again, episode twenty-six: Feast of Fools, Part Two

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

**Ilyaas:** Rhia was waiting on my bed. She stared at me with the frown of I-know-where-you've-been, and I sent her back the look of *nothing happened*.

*It wasn't as nice as the tavern you took me to, I said, flippantly, shucking off my cloak and hanging it up. A different atmosphere. I'd rate it lower. Three stars on Yelp. You still know all the best spots.*

*Ilyaas -- she began, prying and already sorry at the same time. There was a lot in the way she said my name. Remember who you are. Remember who he is.*

*They didn't recognize us, I continued. It's okay.*

*That is not what I meant, she snapped, slamming the wardrobe door shut behind me. You know what I'm saying. There are two sides, and your prince --*

*Your prince, she'd said. Well - prometide. She'd switched to Rhysean for it. It's - like. Betrothed, but affectionate. My love. The one I'm bound to. She'd said it like a curse.*

*I'd known the word, though I hadn't learned it from her. Cassian had used it, in our brief conversation about our betrothal. I'd made him define it for me, and he'd flushed. I'd had to drag it out of him, his ears red, and that was when I ended the conversation.*

*- he can be swayed, I cut in. We were both red now, that word spoken into existence, but I was nothing if not insufferably stubborn. Without his mother's voice whispering in his ears, he's... true.*

This was more a hope said aloud than any promise or thing made easily true. But I couldn't pretend I didn't love him, at least a little bit. Despite everything.

I could hear Rhia's teeth grinding together. *I've known him a lot longer than you have, Ilyaas. He's not good.*

I didn't think, then, about the people he'd killed, because I'd killed people, too. But the tavern songs washed through my head and I was still dizzy with the day. And the more I clung to that hope, the more I believed he could be changed. *Tell yourself a lie. Turn it into the truth.*

*But I know him better than you do. All he wants is to be known.*

Rhia bit her lip but didn't say anything, shuffled some papers on the desk in a way that screamed she was annoyed. But she didn't bring it up again.

And I believed it. There was good in Cassian. And, more than that, despite everything, I didn't want to lose him.

That evening -- I had slept through most of the day, after our night out, and I'd been told not to wander, regardless -- all of the poets that had come were invited to the castle for a feast. The next day, the competition would begin, but that night was for showing off before it truly mattered, was for the kings to flaunt their wealth and their son and -- me. Cassian sat at the head of his own table -- the king of prophecy, burnished

gold and and beautiful -- and I to his right -- the soldier. The seat on his left was left empty, symbolic, waiting for his poet, the rest of the table filled with guards and soldiers from Cassian's legion and visiting nobles. While the kings sat at an elevated table, both on one side overlooking the feast, Cassian and I dined at the long tables with all else.

And, god, were there a lot of people. Cassian informed me that this was only the half of it, that all the no-name poets that hadn't secured a seat were being fed on the steps of the palace, among the marketplace sprawl set up for the occasion. A true festival, for everyone around.

The thing about poets is that they don't sit still. They're driven by the songs in their head or the feel of the universe all around them to *move*, to keep moving until everything makes sense. Even as we sat, even as we remained in our seats, they didn't, leaping all about the hall, getting up and talking to their friends long-time-not-seen.

And many came to talk to us, whether they were rich themselves or no, because we were their future, maybe, possibly, just as much as they were ours. It would've been flattering, I think, if I'd been able to understand. But every *my sovereign* followed by some sweeping lyrical compliment Cassian struggled to translate soured around the smiles I offered in return, because all I could think was how much I hated *not knowing*, how

much I hated myself for taking part in these festivities while Rhysea died outside the lavish hall we dined in.

There were hundreds of them -- girls and boys and folks that were neither or both or somewhere in-between, clutching every portable instrument you've seen and half you haven't. That many seventeen-year-olds in one room was the closest environment I'd encountered to my high school since I'd arrived, three hundred teenagers playing political games poised as something else. Sponsors, too, came with their found poet and bowed and made their remarks, old and graying shoving forth the young and bright. Music played nonstop, though no one at the castle had hired musicians, but this was a party for bards -- there were always five or six or ten poets scattered throughout, standing on tables, perching on benches with a half-circle crowd 'round them, peddling the only ware that mattered that night.

Despite my anxieties -- god, *loathing*, *vague self-loathing*, really is a more fitting word -- it was something spectacular. I was straining my ears to pick out the tune of a girl with a little harp when the hall went silent, a rippling sort of hush that started at our table and spread out. I turned towards Cassian to see what was wrong.

A boy had taken the empty seat to Cassian's left -- the one meant for the poet. The one meant to remain empty all evening.

The hall stared. The boy grinned, a wolf's grin, sharp teeth and sharp edges staining him and the lyre he set on the table. Cassian rose, his shoulders tightening with anger, and the boy stood in tandem with him, dropping into an exaggeratedly low bow, flourishes and all. The two chairs scraped along the floor, echoing round the room.

*My sovereigns*, said the wolf-boy, his golden hair flopping out of his face as he stood. *Rex. Soldat.*

*Explain yourself*, Cassian ground out in Rhysean, his words dangerous, loud enough for all to hear.

*This seat is for the poet, no?* The boy asked, deceptively light. He spread his pale hands, saying, *I am the poet.*

Well -- *seanoc poeta*. I am -- poet. This seat is for -- poet. Whether this was *the* poet or a poet, I couldn't tell you. It's vague in Rhysean -- articles don't exist. Intentions are often assumed. Which worked in the boy's favor, I suppose. Left his chessboard open enough to not end with his head and the rest of his body in two separate pieces.

It was clear what he meant, though. Technicalities aside.

He stepped around Cassian, lyre still flung across the table. The boy stepped around to me, and, unsure of what else to do, I stood, too. *Vatakina Eligida - Your hair is brighter than I'd imagined*, he said, grandly, in Rhysean. *Do me the honor of letting me tell your and the king's stories.*

I stumbled something out, fragmented, not quite a sentence, about competitions and opportunities and songs. He just smiled, and bowed, not *unphased by* so much as *having expected* my shitty Rhysean.

Which -- I don't know, was a bit of a shock. There was always a flash of disappointment in people's eyes when they realized how little I really knew.

Cassian cocked his head just slightly -- appraising. He gave the boy a once-over before asking his name.

Well -- demanding. A question delivered as a statement, the words of a king. *Your name.*

*Io*, the boy said, *Io from the Far Shore.*

*Io*, Cassian repeated, measuredly. *I hope you're able to spin gold with your stories.*

*Io's* eyes sparked -- his *ploy*, however bull-headed it had seemed from the outset, had paid off. But that was *Io* -- every move was calculated down to the last. He had a nasty habit of making the improbable on paper possible in person. Cunning -- that's the word for people like him. *Don't worry*, he said, and bowed again, *I can.*

And then he was gone, snatching his lyre from the table and disappearing into the crowd. Cassian's eyes followed him as he weaved back, the wolf-boy already talking anew with people on his way. I knew that look on Cassian -- he was running his own

calculations, playing out all the risks. And he was liking the results.

A thousand bards had descended on the city, all hoping to set themselves apart with a half-schemed *somehow*. Io from the Far Shore had just managed it.

Another boy, some fifteen minutes later, tried to slide into the poet's seat, too. That boy spent the rest of his evening outside of the palace gates.

As Cassian walked me back to my room that night, revelries echoing up from the streets below, his mind was still turning with whatever plan he'd started concocting when Io sat down beside us. *Get some rest*, he told me, leaning against my door frame as I stepped inside. *We start listening tomorrow after breakfast. And I want to go exploring tomorrow night -- it'll be better if you're with me.* His eyes cleared as he pushed away his train of thought, and grinned. *I did promise we'd see everything.*

A laugh echoed up from somewhere far below. A lively tune filtered through the din of stone, partygoers clapping and cheering as poets challenged each other in the streets. I grinned back, and nodded, trying to believe my lies, and swallowed down the apprehension bubbling in my throat.

**Abigail, as the outro:** Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you're enjoying the show, please consider leaving a review on your podcast platform of choice or supporting Back Again, Back Again on Ko-Fi at [ko-fi.com/backagainpodcast](https://ko-fi.com/backagainpodcast), where if you leave a topic in your donation box, I'll write you a ridiculous little lymerick to read out at the end of the show! If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from [FreeMusicArchive.org](https://freemusicarchive.org). Visit the description of this episode for full copyright information and a link to the page. Sound effect attribution, similarly, can be found in the episode description.

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